تصورات طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية بالتعليم العالي في ليبيا لعلاقة الأستاذ بالطالب في مجتمع القاعة الدراسية

رجب علي اهويدي*

الملخص:

تبحث هذه الورقة في تصورات طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية بالتعليم العالي في ليبيا لعلاقة الأستاذ بالطالب في مجتمع قاعة الدراسة. تبنت الدراسة منهجية البحث النوعي واستهدفت اثنتي عشرة طالبة نظامية يدرسن بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية التربية في إحدى الجامعات الليبية، وكانت الغاية من الدراسة استكشاف آراء وتجارب الطلاب فيما يخص علاقة الأستاذ بالطالب في مجتمع القاعة الدراسية، واستخدمت لجمع البيانات طريقة المقابلة الشخصية شبه المركبة. من خلال تحليل البيانات تبين عدم وجود روح الجماعة بالقاعة الدراسية مما أدّى إلى وجود علاقة هرمية بين الأستاذ والطلاب، ولا اقتراح للعمل الجماعي، ولا مراعاة لحاجات الطلاب التعليمية، ولا اعتبار للفروق الفردية بينهم. في ضوء هذه النتائج تقترح الدراسة إقامة علاقة أكثر بينية بالقاعة الدراسية واقتراح العمل الجماعي مع الأخذ في الاعتبار حاجات الطلاب التعليمية بالإضافة إلى الفروق الفردية بينهم، ليشجعهم على المشاركة بفعالية في العملية التعليمية والرفع من مستوى أدائهم التعليمي.

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* قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية التربية، الجامعة الأسمرية الإسلامية.

Libyan EFL Higher Education Students' Perceptions of the Tutor–Student Relationship in the Classroom Community

RAGAB AlI HAWEDI[**]

Abstract

This paper examines Libyan EFL higher education students' perceptions of the tutor-student relationship in the classroom community. A qualitative study was carried out targeting a group of 12 undergraduate university students majoring in English as a foreign language. These students were studying fulltime in a college of education at a Libyan university. The study was guided by the following aim: to explore the views and experiences of Libyan EFL higher education students in terms of the tutor–student relationship in the classroom community. The study used semi–structured interviews to gather data for analysis. Data analysis showed that there was no sense of community in the classroom creating a hierarchical relationship between the tutor and students. Group- work was not suggested, students' needs were not considered and differentiation was not acknowledged. In the light of these results, the study suggests establishing a more interpersonal relationship in the classroom, suggesting groupwork, considering students' learning needs and acknowledging differentiation to encourage students to participate effectively in the teaching and learning process and enhance their learning performance.

Key words: tutor, student, relationship, classroom community, higher education

[**] English Language Department, Faculty of Education, Al–Asmarya Islamic University
E–mail: r.hawedi@asmarya.edu.ly

Introduction

The teaching and learning process normally encompasses factors that positively or negatively influence it. These factors work together in order to enable the student to promote his/her learning performance. However, if any of these elements does not contribute positively to the teaching and learning process, the student will encounter difficulties in enhancing the pace of his/her learning. One of these elements is the tutor–student relationship, which is considered vital in the classroom. A student needs a caring and motivating classroom environment in order to make the effort to improve his/her learning of the target language.

In Libyan higher education institutions, the topic of the tutor–student relationship in the classroom has been the focus of the academic discourse. Students sometimes address this topic amongst themselves and, if offered a chance, with their tutors inside and outside the classroom. As a university tutor, I had always observed students' negative comments regarding the relationship with their tutors. This prompted me to carry out this study in order to find out more about this phenomenon from the student's perspective and to draw the educators' attention to its importance in the classroom. Drawing on this, the aim of the study was to explore Libyan higher education students' views and experiences regarding the tutor–student relationship in the classroom community. To achieve this aim, the study targeted 12 Libyan higher education students majoring in English as a foreign language as a case study, employing a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews to collect data for

analysis to answer the following research question: How do Libyan EFL higher education students see the relationship with their tutors in the classroom community?

Literature Review

This section presents arguments and discussions linked to the tutor–student relationship and how researchers in the field of education addressed this phenomenon. It also deals with the relevant teaching and learning strategies suggested for achieving better relationships between the tutor and students in the classroom.

Although the tutor–student relationship in higher education is considered crucial in the teaching and learning process, it seems that this topic has not received much attention. Hagenauer and Volet (2014, cited by Kahu and Picton 2019) point out that the tutor–student relationship remains uninvestigated and also untheorized in the field of higher education and, to the best of my knowledge, the tutor student relationship in the Libyan classroom community has not been the focus of the educational research yet.

Commenting on the importance of the tutor–student relationship in the classroom, Agustina and Cahyono state: "teacher–student relationship becomes one of the determinant factors in students' success in the classroom" (Agustina and Cahyono, 2016, p. 92). Yusra et al. (2014), conducted a literature review on nursing education and found that the current studies highlight that a helpful teacher–student relationship impact students' learning. They also state that an instructor needs to have an outstanding rapport with his/her learners to assist learning and have an encouraging attitude. da Luz (2015) also carried out a study and found that instructors and learners

appreciate a helpful and considerate relationship among them and interaction is important to the rapport between a teacher and a learner. Thus, the tutor-student relationship can be considered the basis of the classroom community. It might also be the driving positive force of the teaching and learning process. When a learner is exposed to an encouraging inducement, he/she is better able to recall recently learned knowledge (Nielson and Lorber, 2009 cited by da Luz, 2015). Therefore, a tutor should not only provide students with knowledge but also take care of them through creating a stimulating climate that motivates them to enhance their learning performance.

The tutor-student relationship is social in nature that both the tutor and students develop through the teaching and learning process. They get into this process as any two persons might do (Frymier and Houser, 2000). Also, Littlewood (1981) likens the classroom context to that of the family when he states that in learning a foreign language the learner acquires structures and skills in the classroom context as we do when we acquire the basic skills of our mother tongue in the family context. Thus, it is the duty of the tutor to create a supportive relationship in the classroom to encourage students to enhance their learning performance.

Addressing the conceptualisation of the tutor-student relationship in the classroom context, Hagenauer and Volet point out: "from the school research, it is clear that TSR [Teacher-Student Relationship] cannot be conceptualised as a one-dimensional construct; rather, it is multi-dimensional in nature" (Hagenauer and Volet, 2014, p. 373).

It can therefore be noted that the factor of the tutor-student

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relationship is a multifaceted phenomenon and this has seemingly resulted in addressing it from different perspectives. For example, Yusra et al. explored the aspects of "caring, support, trust and respect" (Yusra et al., 2014, p. 168). However, da Luz (2015) addressed differentiated learning as well as classroom management. This study focuses on: creating a sense of community through groupwork, considering learners' needs and differentiating learning.

Creating a sense of community can be considered central to the tutor–student relationship in the classroom context. In order to achieve this, a tutor needs to adopt a learner–centred strategy and employ engaging leaning activities. Linked to this, Street points to the importance of team working when he suggests that a more institutional change that has been important for the educational arena has been the strategy: "of team working on projects rather than hierarchical forms of organization that simply pass orders down a chain of command" (Street, 1998, p. 7). Accordingly, it can be argued that employing the strategy of team working and suggesting interactive learning activities would create a sense of community in the classroom as each student in the team would feel that he/she belongs to the learning community and, in one way or another, responsible for the accomplishment of a learning task. Another strategy which might help in creating a sense of community in the classroom is the Project-Based Approach. This strategy according to Larsen-Freeman (2000) focuses on using language in real situations. Based on this approach, students might be encouraged to do a project such as issuing a newspaper in the target language. Students do the project in three phases of planning, collecting information and writing

and in the final phase, they review their work and are provided with feedback from the instructor. Such a strategy, if employed, would promote interaction between students and between students and the tutor and create a sense of community and a better tutor-student relationship in the classroom.

Also, Oxford describes collaborative learning that views learning "as construction of knowledge within a social context and…encourages acculturation of individuals into a learning community" (Oxford, 1997, p.443). Therefore, collaborative learning creates a social climate for the student to interact through learning with his/her fellow students and participate as a member of the classroom community. Dubin and Olshtain also state that within the instructor-student relationship, students' activities happen "in a cooperative, open, and caring manner" (Dubin and Olshtain, 1986, p. 77). This means that when a student feels that he/she is taken care of and his/her role is considered in the classroom, he/she would make the effort to enhance the pace of his/her learning performance.

Students' learning needs are also an important aspect of a tutor-student relationship in the classroom. Hyland (2007) points out that teaching should be explicit and consider students' needs. Lakshmi and Al-Ashab believe that the instructor is recommended to "tailor the course according to the needs of the students" (Lakshmi and Al-Ashab, 2013, p.141). Littlewood (1981) also states that when determining what functions, subjects etc. link to students' learning needs, instructors are advised to rely on their perceptions and observations. To facilitate the task, they might distribute check-lists

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that they can adapt as they think required. Students feel that they are taking part in the teaching and learning process when their learning needs are considered.

Finally, the concept of differentiation which is an important part of the tutor–student relationship. This concept according to Tomlinson (2001b, cited by Jerrell et al. 2004) means giving learners several approaches to comprehend content, tackle ideas, and improve production. With regard to its importance, da Luz (2005) argues that it is vital to have an instructor who cares for his/her learners' requirements, and initiates rapport with them, providing them with equal chances to participate in doing learning activities. Establishing equity in the classroom encourages the less able students to improve self–confidence and foster their language learning through finding a chance to participate. Oxford also suggests: "teachers and learners are in the best position to understand style conflicts (as well as style harmonies) if they have taken the time to identify and discuss their own preferred styles" (Oxford, 1997, p.450). For adapting to students' different learning styles, Mangubhai recommends: "teachers can … vary classroom activities in ways that might address students' different learning styles" (Mangubhai, 2006, p. 59). Students come to the classroom with different abilities and styles of learning. Therefore, employing varied teaching styles is important as they help the tutor to address students' different strategies of learning.

This study therefore draws on these arguments and contends that in order to promote students' learning performance, a tutor needs to establish a better working relationships with them in the classroom. This can be achieved through creating a sense of community through suggesting and encouraging groupwork and consideration of their

learning needs by adapting the course to their learning requirements. He/she also needs to consider equity through employing varied teaching styles and providing students with equal opportunities to practise the language in varied uses.

Methodology

To investigate the topic of the tutor–student relationship in the Libyan classroom community, it was appropriate for this study to carry out qualitative research to explore the phenomenon from the student's perspective. The qualitative research paradigm is defined by Creswell as "an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem" (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Denzin and Lincolin (2008) also state that the qualitative research paradigm encompasses researching phenomena in their natural surroundings and this helps the investigator to understand the phenomena regarding the implications people ascribe to them. As it aimed to explore Libyan EFL higher education students' perceptions of the tutor–student relationship in the classroom community, the current adopted the qualitative research paradigm. Hennink et al. (2011) point out that the qualitative approach provides the researcher with an opportunity to examine the topic researched from the participants' perspectives through exploring their views and experiences. Hence, this qualitative research approach suits the study because of the social nature of the topic researched and the context of the study that depicts a group of people in a specific setting, being a group of Libyan EFL higher education students.

In a research project, the aim usually specifies the sampling

procedures. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) point out that in qualitative research, it is not always possible to examine all the population targeted in the study, but only portion of it can be accessed. Silverman (2006) also believes that purposive sampling would enable a researcher to select a case as it exhibits features that he/she needs to investigate. Thus, a purposive sample of 12 EFL undergraduate university students was selected as a case study signifying the characteristics of Libyan higher education students as its relevant population. The sample included students from second year, third year and fourth year. First year students were excluded because of their limited familiarity with the context of higher education. It is worth noting here that the results gained may not be generalised to the population targeted but they may offer an account of relevance beyond the study.

Since the gender difference was not to be targeted in the study, all the students were females. They were Libyan, aged between 21 and 22 years and their L1 background was Arabic. They graduated from some secondary schools and were now studying as fulltime students at the department of English in a college of education at a Libyan university during the academic year 2018/2019. They were taught by 11 Libyan tutors and 2 tutors of other nationalities with MA or PhD qualifications in teaching English as a foreign language. By the time of this research, these students had been learning EFL, as their major, for at least two years. This meant that they had experienced the tutor–student relationship in the classroom context. As participants, these students were interviewed to comment on the relationship with their tutors in the classroom.

As regards research ethics, according to Silverman (2005) and the

BERA Guidelines for Educational Research (2011), before conducting the interviews, I had obtained consent from the students targeted. In the findings and discussion section, I refer anonymously to the university, the college, teaching staff members and capital letters are used to conceal the participants' identities.

For data collection, semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit data for analysis. Bloom and Crabtree highlight: "semi-structured interviews are often the sole data source for qualitative research" (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006, p.315). This type of interview is used since it can balance between the interviewer and the interviewees because they offer them an opportunity to talk naturally giving as much information as possible and this is what the investigator needs to obtain (Hammersley, 2008). This type of interview was used to collect the data needed for the study and guided by a set of questions that had already been prepared. The interviews were conducted in Arabic. This was to give the participants a chance to talk easily and provide as much information as possible. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed and translated the elicited data into English.

To approach the analysis process, I needed to take into consideration the research question guiding the study. In support of this, Basit (2010) states that in the analysis process, the task of the investigator is to arrive at accounts from descriptions. He/she employs his/her skills to specify data that are related to the research questions and analyses these data in light of them. For this study, using the inductive strategy (Mertler, 2009), the data obtained were constantly

read, thematically categorised and coded. Afterwards, it was described and interpreted in light of the research question guiding the study in order to obtain an insightful account of the topic investigated.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses an analysis of the research group of Libyan EFL higher education students' perceptions of the tutor–student relationship in the classroom community. Short extracts from some of the participant's comments are italicised and used to support the discussion of findings.

Hierarchal Relationship

To begin with, most of the students in this study expressed their resentment regarding the relationship with most of their tutors. They stated they did not get a sense of community in the classroom. Student A commented: *There is no sense of community in the classroom. Most of the tutors present the lesson, give instructions and leave.* Student D added: *There is no sense of community in the classroom. The relationship between the tutor and the students is not encouraging in the classroom. Even the students themselves do not work together.* These comments suggest that the relationship between the tutor and students in the classroom tends to be hierarchical in nature. This tendency might be attributed to adoption of a teacher–centred style of delivery prevalent in the Libyan classroom context. According to this strategy, the role of the tutor is to present the lesson and give instructions and students have to follow and work individually resulting in a hierarchical relationship between the tutor and students. Adopting a more student–centred strategy of teaching

would help in establishing a more interpersonal relationship between the tutor and students. On the contrary, a hierarchical relationship in which instructions are given by the tutor and passed down to students through orders (Street, 1998), might undermine the sense of community in the classroom and hinder students' endeavor to learn the language effectively and productively.

Lack of Groupwork

Linked to this, the majority of the students noted that most of their tutors did not organise or encourage learning strategies such as groupwork. Student E said: *There is no encouragement of groupwork in the classroom. Most of our tutors just teach and set exams.* Student G also said: *Most of the tutors do not encourage groupwork in the classroom. Almost everything is done by the tutor.* These comments suggest that the tutor does not considerately deal with his/her students by creating a situation in which they are engaged in language use through working as a group. The lack of groupwork might be due to adoption of a teacher-centred style in the classroom situation. According to this style, the tutor is central to the teaching and learning process and students' role is not in the focus. Lakshmi and Al-Ashab state: "students should be encouraged to take part in role-plays, discussions and so on. If such activities are organised, students get more motivated and fast learning takes place" (Lakshmi and Al-Ashab, 2013, p. 24). Thus, it is the tutor's task to encourage students to interact and practise the target language through doing learning activities in pairs and groups rather than working individually.

The lack of organising groupwork can be attributed also to the large

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class size and the desks that usually impede groupwork. Krumm believes: "seating arrangements… are very important … in arranging communicative activities" (Krumm, 1980, p. 77). Also, Amedeo and Dyck observe: "movements, motions, orientations, positions, interactions, and arrangements are all part of the activity dynamics in the classroom" (Amedeo and Dyck, 2003, p.325). If the classroom is physically appropriate, the tutor and students can perform the teaching and learning activities effectively and profitably. Conversely, if the classroom is not physically appropriate, it would prevent the tutor and students from working in groups and such a situation might result in a tendency of the tutor–student relationship towards hierarchy.

Unconsidered Needs

Comments by some of the students also showed that students' learning needs were not considered in the teaching and learning process. Student H commented: *Most of the tutors do not suggest or encourage classroom discussion to discuss our learning needs and if they do they usually react negatively. I once commented on a topic suggesting that we would study another topic as that topic had been dealt with previously. The tutor responded negatively and regarded that as a lack of respect.* Student K added: *Most of the tutors do not encourage us to add anything based on our own readings, for example, from the Internet.* These comments indicate that the tutor presents the lesson according to his/her own beliefs with no consideration of students learning needs. He/she views that students need to receive knowledge imparted to them through following the syllabus suggested and the instructions of the tutor and their language production needs to be compatible with the syllabus and the

instructions given to them. Ellis argues: "adult learners dislike having a coursebook imposed upon them in a rigid way. They prefer a variety of materials and the opportunity to use them in ways they choose for themselves" (Ellis, 1985,   p. 103). Although the tutor's knowledge and beliefs are vital in the teaching and learning process, consideration of students' learning needs is also important, not only for learning but also for heightening a student's self-esteem.

Undifferentiated Learning

For the last element, most of the students demanded consideration of individual differences in classes. Student B commented: *The majority of our tutors focus on the able students and encourage them but they do not focus on the less able students. We suffer a lot from this discrimination in the classroom.* Student F added: *Most of our tutors focus on the able students and ignore the rest of the class.* These comments indicate that students' rights to be treated equally and according to their individual abilities are not considered. Focusing on the able students and ignoring the rest of the class would deprive the less able students of their rights to participate in the teaching and learning activities. Ellis contends: "L2 learners vary considerably both in how quickly they learn and in how successful they are" (Ellis, 1985, p. 123). Creating a supportive relationship through differentiating learning would encourage the less able students to participate in the lesson and feel that they are included in the classroom academic community.

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Conclusion

Data analysis showed that there was no sense of community in the classroom. The students did not appear to have prominent presence in the classroom suggesting a hieratical relationship in the classroom community. Adopting a teacher-centred strategy seemed to have negatively influenced the role of students in the teaching and learning process. It was also revealed that there was a lack of groupwork. This indicates adoption of a teacher-centred style in the teaching and learning process or the class size and the desks. Consideration of students' learning needs was also perceived to be ignored depriving students of working in an engaging learning situation. This suggests the tutor's beliefs about the relationship with the student regarding the course delivery. Acknowledgement of individual differences was also demanded. This suggests a lack of varied teaching styles that might motivate the less able students to participate in class work and improve their learning performance.

These findings might have the following implications for improving the tutor-student relationship in the Libyan classroom community:

Educators in general and university tutors in particular need to reshape their view of the tutor-student relationship in the classroom context. Establishing a better tutor-student relationship would promote the teaching and learning process and encourage students to foster their learning performance.

Tutors are advised to suggest and encourage teaching and learning strategies such as pair work, groupwork and class discussion to create a sense of community in the classroom. They also need to consider students' learning needs. This might be achieved through organising

class discussions in which students find a chance to discuss their learning requirements. Further, they are recommended to consider the aspect of individual differences in the teaching and learning process. This would be achieved through employing varied teaching techniques. Adopting such teaching strategies would create a more inclusive classroom community in which the less able students find a chance to participate and improve their learning performance.

Officials in collaboration with educators need to support the higher education sector by improving the working conditions in the educational institutions. Small class sizes and suitable desks, if found, would help tutors and students to organise varied learning activities.

As regards the limitations of the study, the following points can be made:

In conducting the study, I used semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection. Although, I assured the interviewees that they could express their views freely, my presence with them, the nature of the topic and being recorded might have affected their answers and comments.

The data were collected in the students' L1, i.e. Arabic and then transcribed and translated into English. I repeatedly read the written data and listened to the recordings several times to understand and convey the intended meanings. Although I made the effort to avoid any misinterpretations, there might be some meanings or concepts that may not have been precisely conveyed because of the process of translation.

The following are some recommendations for further research:

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The tutor-student relationship in the classroom community is a multifaceted phenomenon. This study focused on the aspects of creating a sense of community through groupwork, considering students leering needs and learning differentiation. More studies are recommended to be conducted in order to examine the other aspects of this phenomenon.

The study explored the topic of the tutor-student relationship from the student's perspective. Further research is recommended to explore the topic from the tutor's perspective. This would add to our understanding of this phenomenon as an aspect of the classroom academic community.

The study examined the topic of the tutor-student relationship using only one method of data collection. Triangulated studies are recommended to be conducted to confirm its results and gain a broader picture of this important element of the classroom community.

As a final thought, the tutor-student relationship in the classroom community is a broad topic and needs a lot of research. This small scale study attempted to shed light on this phenomenon. Educators in general and university tutors in particular need to pay attention to this element as an aspect of the teaching profession. Unquestionably, effective teaching does not only mean imparting knowledge to students and asking them to unpack what they have learned on examination papers but also the establishment of a responsive relationship in order to encourage them to enhance their learning performance.

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